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2 Contractors Rescind Request For CIA Facility in Reston

Officials Objected to 197-Foot Tower

By John F. Harris
Washington Post Staff Writer

When Fairfax County officials learned last summer that the Central Intelligence Agency needed a communications facility in the Reston area "for reasons of national defense," many said it was their patriotic duty to consider the proposal.

When they learned that what the agency had in mind was a microwave communications station that would mark Reston's skyline with a 197-foot-tall, 27-foot-wide tower, they said, "No way."

After months of sparring with local officials, contractors for the CIA rescinded their request for permission to erect the tower this week, according to county authorities.

One of the contractors, identified in the papers as an Alexandria firm named Overseas Telecommunications Inc., proposed the facility to "connect a satellite earth station at Quantico with facilities at Langley, Virginia, and ultimately the White House," the papers show. Langley is the home of the CIA.

Fairfax County Board Vice Chairman Martha V. Pennino, a Democrat who represents the Reston area on the county board and a leading foe of the proposed tower, said yesterday a ranking CIA official told her on Tuesday that heavy opposition to the tower forced the agency to find an alternative means of transmitting its signals.

The CIA declined to comment.

The tower would have been part of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a branch of the CIA, according to zoning papers. A CIA spokeswoman said the service monitors foreign broadcasts and compiles information for use by other U.S. agencies.

"I think they [the CIA] realized that that site was the wrong site," said John H. Thillmann, a Fairfax County Planning Commission member. "Let's be honest . . . It was an eyesore, and it was right in the backyard of two communities and across the street from another."

Brian Wood, a spokesman for New Jersey-based Bell Atlantic, said that an Alexandria firm identified as Overseas Telecommunications Inc. approached Bell Atlantic last summer, saying it was acting as a broker for the federal government in finding a location for several large disks to be used for microwave communications.

Bell Atlantic already owns a tower on the Reston site, but its base is only 4 feet in diameter and could not support the new apparatus, so the company applied to Fairfax County for permission to build a new tower to accommodate Overseas' needs.

When Thillmann told the officials that zoning approval for the new tower would take several months, he said, "They were aghast. They said 'We've got to have a decision within two weeks.'"

"Their attitude was: 'We've got to have this thing right away, and if we don't have it, we're going to build it anyway.'"

Thillmann said Bell Atlantic and Overseas officials at first did not acknowledge what federal agency they were working for. "You never knew who you were dealing with," he said. "It was a strange, strange affair."

"I'm not into this kind of cloak-and-dagger routine," Pennino complained, before the application was rescinded.

Thillmann and Pennino said they later learned that site was attractive to the CIA because it was near offices in downtown Reston where the agency plans to move some of its operations. Many Reston resi-

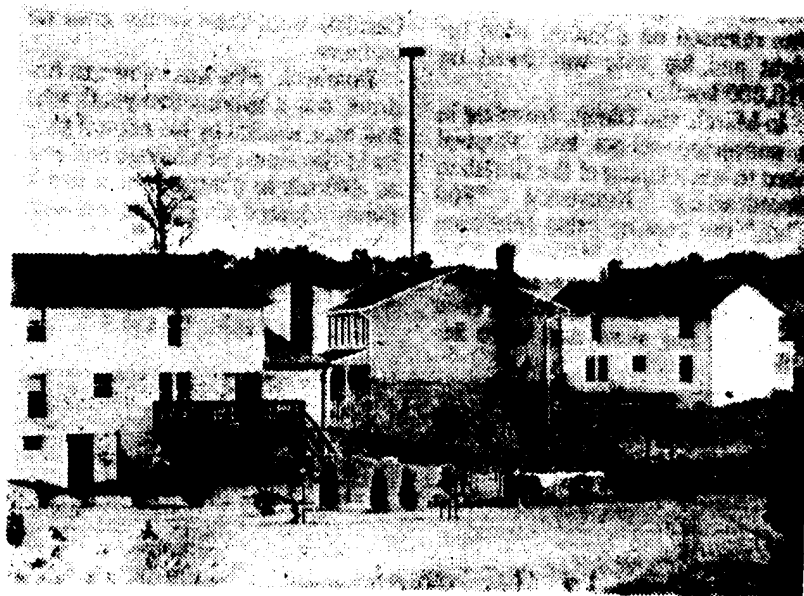
dents have opposed the CIA move, saying the secretive agency is not compatible with the air of "openness" they want for their community.

"We've never confirmed or denied that we are doing anything out there," said CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster.

A spokesman for Overseas said yesterday that the CIA had instructed the firm not to comment on the tower. The spokesman denied suggestions from some Reston opponents that Overseas was a dummy corporation for the CIA, saying the firm has several million dollars in revenues, and deals with over 20 Fortune 500 businesses.

As microwave communications technology has blossomed, proposals for towers have been increasingly controversial. Although no ill physical effects have been documented because of microwave communications, their use often conjures frightening images to the public, according to private specialists on microwave technology.

Also, because microwave communication requires a "line-of-sight" path from tower to tower, station to station, large, obtrusive towers are often needed.



BY DAYNA SMITH - THE WASHINGTON POST

Bell Atlantic tower on site where larger CIA communications tower was planned.